Vulnerabilities in the face of the health crisis: the impact of COVID-19 on the educational experiences of children and adolescents in situations of neglect

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Abstract

This article is the result of a research process within the RESISTIRÉ project, which evaluates the responses to the COVID crisis in social policy processes in several European countries. This study has taken into account the experience of girls and adolescents in situations of neglect in the circumstances that have surrounded their educational processes and their academic reality in the COVID period.

Situations of neglect in childhood are those that affect the normal personal, social and material development of minors, generating situations of high vulnerability that imply the need to activate alternative protection measures that guarantee the subjective right of every child and/or adolescent.

Thought should be given to the special relevance that the health crisis has had on the reality of these girls and adolescents whose legal guardians -affected by particular life situations- have been able to suffer in an aggravated manner in the face of a reality that previously constituted a highly vulnerable situation.

The article focuses on the reality of girls and adolescents in the Basque Country (Spain). For this purpose, and through the access to their narratives, the particularity of their vital conditions is identified, showing their high resilient capacity, as well as the difficulties, alternatives and capacities developed to face adversity.

Keywords: girls; adolescents; protection; neglect; health crisis; education

Resumen. *Vulnerabilidades ante la crisis sanitaria: incidencia del COVID 19 en los procesos educativos de niñas y adolescentes en situación de desamparo*

Este artículo es el resultado de un proceso de investigación dentro del proyecto RESISTI-RÉ. Concretamente, este estudio ha tenido en cuenta la vivencia de niñas y adolescentes en situación de desamparo ante las circunstancias que han rodeado sus procesos formativos y su realidad académica en la época COVID.

Las situaciones de desprotección grave y/o desamparo en la infancia son aquellas que inciden en el normal desarrollo personal, social y material de las personas menores de edad, generando situaciones de alta vulnerabilidad que implican la necesidad de activar medidas alternativas de protección que garanticen el derecho subjetivo de todo niño, niña y/o adolescente.

Atendiendo a estas consideraciones, la crisis sanitaria ha tenido una especial relevancia ante la realidad de estas niñas y adolescentes cuyos responsables legales -afectados por particulares situaciones vitales- han podido padecer de manera agravada ante una realidad que previamente constituía una situación altamente vulnerable.

El artículo centra su mirada en la realidad de las niñas y adolescentes del País Vasco (España). Mediante el acceso a sus narrativas y el conocimiento de sus experiencias obtenido de primera mano, se identifica la particularidad de sus condicionamientos vitales mostrando su alta capacidad resiliente, sus dificultades, alternativas y capacidades desarrolladas para hacer frente a la adversidad.

Palabras clave: niñas; adolescentes; protección; desamparo; crisis sanitaria; educación

Summary

1. Introduction

The study of children as a collective has historically been characterized by a lack of attention to their specific needs as developing *beings* (González, 2017). The continuing differences between societies and cultures on the issue of child protection were notably highlighted during the COVID-19 crisis, forcing states, countries and regions to act quickly to alleviate situations of vulnerability among children.

These measures, however, were mostly of an improvised and emergency nature, against a backdrop of unpredictability and uncertainty. With the passing of time, we can now assess the effectiveness of these responses.

The aim of this research is therefore to examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the educational process of adolescent girls living in residential children's homes in Gipuzkoa. Girls and adolescents in a situation of neglect

face a two- or three-fold vulnerability: as minors who are victims of violence or severe neglect within their birth families; as women in social contexts that are still characterized by inequality; and as the subjects of highly complex social phenomena such as migration, mental illness or early trauma experienced in origin.

Throughout this article our aim is to understand the educational experiences of a group of young people in order to examine the impact of institutionalization on their individual educational experiences.

2. Literature review

2.1. Characteristics of residential life: child protection, gender and vulnerability

González (2017) offers some interesting data on the characteristics associated with children in residential care today: they are generally from highly dysfunctional families which have been the object of interventions over many years aimed at family preservation, although this aim has ultimately failed; they come from environments where there is the constant presence of male violence; likewise, in recent years the emergence of phenomena involving new forms of violence has been observed, such as parent-child violence associated with the absence of parental control; among the adolescent population, the incidence of behavioural problems and the consumption of toxic substances (addictions) is of concern, as well as the prevalence of infant-juvenile mental illness. These situations coincide with phenomena such as adoption failures and the influx of unaccompanied migrant minors, as Gipuzkoa has gone from being a cross-border territory and therefore a transit territory to being considered a final destination where a planned migratory process can take place (Segú & González, 2020).

The situations that are dealt with by these services show an over-representation of social phenomena such as migration, mental illness, suicidal behaviour, alcohol and other drug use, and violence against women in the family environments of these young people. Children and adolescents who are victims of a serious lack of protection in childhood are more susceptible to developing behavioural or mental health problems, which affects a significant proportion of them (80%, according to figures obtained from the 2016 report of the children's service of the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa); similarly, there is a high incidence of learning difficulties among children in residential care, affecting 18% of their population, compared to 3% of the general population, with 8% displaying suicidal behaviour (Childhood Service of the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa, 2016).

With regard to education and academic development, the figures on school performance are particularly worrying, in terms of their importance for children's transition to the adult world. Various studies of residential foster care programmes in Spain note the low level of educational achievement among adolescents living in this type of setting (Montserrat, Casas & Bertrán, 2013;

López, del Valle, Montserrat & Bravo, 2010; Montserrat, Casas & Baena, 2015; Miguelena, 2019).

Given the characteristics of this research and particularly the group of young women interviewed, we believe it is relevant to highlight at this point the theoretical perspective on the concept of intersectionality. Intersectionality, understood as an analytical tool, argues that the different systemic inequalities are forged and strengthened from the superimposition of different social factors such as gender, ethnicity, age, social class, etc. In this sense, this theory contributes to and helps us understand the different ways in which gender intersects with other identities, and how these intersections contribute to unique experiences of oppression and privilege. It can be said, therefore, that the main aim of the above-mentioned theory is to reveal the varied identities and expose the different types of discrimination and disadvantage that occur as a result of the combination of identities. It also seeks to address the ways in which racism, patriarchy, class oppression and other systems of discrimination create inequalities that structure the relative positions of women in historical, social and political contexts (Association for Women's Rights & Development, 2004; Berkhout & Richardson, 2020; Eaves & Al-Hindi, 2020; Ryan & El Ayadi, 2020).

Thus, the young women taking part in this study are characterised by the complexity of their multiple identities, which must be addressed as part of their future progress towards insertion and transition to adult life.

2.2. Data on academic development in residential care: Child protection under scrutiny

As many authors point out, children and adolescents in care are among the most educationally vulnerable populations (Hedin et al., 2011). The study by Sebba et al. (2015) indicates that there is a significant gap in education between children and adolescents in care and their peers. Adolescents in care are therefore a vulnerable group facing great educational challenges (Tilbury, 2010). They tend to achieve poorer results across different contexts in terms of grades, literacy and numeracy test scores, attendance and exclusions (O'Higgins, Sebba & Luke, 2015); a lower academic suitability rate; and a lack of expectations regarding the educational environment, among others (Montserrat et al., 2015; Martín et al., 2020). Generally, a very small percentage continue with further education (López et al., 2010), and an even lower proportion enrol in university studies (Jackson, Cameron & Graham, 2015). Thus, we find that the educational path followed by the majority of children and adolescents in residential care is more related to short-term work-related studies, as this has been identified as an easier pathway that allows them a rapid route to employment (Miguelena, 2019). Consequently, it can be said that there is a clear link between the low level of educational attainment and the risk of social exclusion (Jackson & Cameron, 2012). This situation contributes to the construction of a disadvantaged social image of this group of children and adolescents (Morentín-Encina & Ballesteros Velázquez, 2022),

thus making the education process essential not only in the present but also for these adolescents' futures.

This aspect is highly relevant given that educational level emerges as a protective factor against the risk of exclusion, especially in the processes of transition to adulthood (Rodríguez & Pérez, 2008; González, 2017; Miguelena, 2019). In this sense, it is worth considering the impact of the lack of economic and emotional support for these young women after they reach the age of eighteen, which greatly hinders their move towards independence (Rodríguez et al., 2022).

If we look at the data and conclusions obtained from previous research, we find a population characterized by habitual school absenteeism and grade repetition, and generally low expectations (Bravo & Del Valle, 2001; Del Valle et al., 2000; Montserrat et al., 2015; Martín et al., 2020), so that a very small percentage of the group reaches further education, and an even smaller percentage goes on to university (López et al., 2010; Domínguez, 2010; Miguelena, 2019).

On the one hand, we know that the emotional state of a person has a direct impact on their work capacity and performance, so that the life situations that these young people have had to face from a very early age have an impact on their development and adaptation at school and in society (García & De la Herran, 2007; Casas & Monserrat, 2009; Melendro, 2010).

However, access to education and the academic pathway are predictors of adaptation and autonomy in the transition to adult life, a transition that they will also have to make much earlier than the average young person (Goyette, 2010). In our view, this aspect is undoubtedly one of the challenges of the current child protection system, as it has an impact on the personal and emotional situation of the subjects as a prior step to later academic achievement.

Being able to understand the specific experiences of the school and educational environments of adolescent female victims of neglect broadens our view of the individual aspects of their unique experiences. In this way, an exceptional situation such as the COVID-19 health emergency allows us to understand the implications of a common and generalized scenario in a particular context, defined by the complexity of its circumstances.

2.3. Vulnerable adolescents: The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their educational experiences.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had significant consequences worldwide. In March 2020, in order to better manage the health crisis resulting from the pandemic, the Spanish Government decreed a state of emergency (Real Decreto 463/2020). This marked the beginning of a severe lockdown, targeting every citizen regardless of age, and placing children and adolescents under strict restrictions (Vallejo-Slocker et al., 2020). Although the number of children affected by the pandemic is relatively small compared to other age groups, the indirect effects caused by this disease, such as the closure of schools, after-

school programmes and recreational activities, disconnected nearly 60 million children and youth from essential resources and support (OECD, 2019). The prohibition to go outside to play or socialize with peers may have had a negative impact on children's and adolescent's well-being (Erades & Morales, 2020). Therefore, it is reasonable to assert that the COVID-19 crisis transformed children's and adolescents' day-to-day lives.

However not all of these children and adolescents were affected in the same way (Vallejo-Slocker et al., 2022). In this sense, the pandemic and its subsequent restrictions created an added difficulty for children and adolescents in residential care, given their home situation and their particular and specific needs, and thus placed them in a doubly vulnerable scenario (OECD, 2020). For children and youth in residential care, physical and social distancing and other COVID-19 restrictions led to feelings of isolation and loneliness, disrupted their routines, and limited their access to extended family, friends and other community support networks. In this sense, and according to the study carried out by UNICEF Spain (2020), the conditions for socializing of children and adolescents in residential care worsened during lockdown.

As noted above, in order to reverse the advance of the pandemic, the social policy responses taken by the government led to the closure of schools. According to the UN (2020), the closure of schools and other learning spaces impacted 94% of the world's student population. In other words, by mid-May 2020, more than 1.2 billion students at all levels of education around the world were no longer attending face-to-face classes at school (UNESCO, 2020).

As school and work activities moved, to a large extent, to virtual formats, school systems transitioned to a non-traditional digital and distance education methodology, developing new materials and platforms and converting to online teaching. In other words, the pandemic became a catalyst for educational institutions around the world to seek innovative solutions in a relatively short period of time (World Economic Forum, 2020). While this may initially have been seen as exciting for children and adolescents, it also had its drawbacks and risks, as on the one hand, the quality of education at home may have worsened their educational experiences, and on the other hand, they may have had less social interaction than through school or face-to-face contact (OECD, 2020). In addition, given that many children and adolescents in residential care may be academically disadvantaged, this new type of virtual learning posed new challenges for them, as they lost access to necessary educational support, such as individualized academic support or tutoring (Font, 2020).

In addition to the personal consequences that school closure had on children and adolescents in residential care, they faced further obstacles linked to the lack of resources that their children's homes could offer them. In some cases, they faced a lack of technology, a lack of internet connectivity, and last but not least, a lack of a supportive learning environment, making it difficult for them to fully engage in distance learning. Overall, one can conclude that the COVID-19 pandemic caused disruption to the academic experiences of adolescents, and negative experiences with online teaching.

2.4. The approach to residential foster care for minors as a child protection measure in the Basque Autonomous Community: The case of Gipuzkoa

The subsidiary nature that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) grants to the relevant public administrations of signatory states with regard to child protection has meant a legislative, organisational and technical readjustment. This has been taking place in Spain since the 1990s.

As we know, public authorities provide a secondary level of protection that is subsidiary to that of the birth family, and is activated only in emergency situations of risk for the child or adolescent when the birth family – either by action, omission or negligence – cannot on its own guarantee the provision of basic needs.

The concepts of risk and neglect are defined in the Spanish Civil Code and replicated in the Basque Law 18/2005 on Care and Protection of Children and Adolescents. These set out the socio-familial situation of the child from a legal perspective and activate child protection services in the event of such risk or neglect.

It is important to point out the importance of the concept of *significant harm* currently employed by social services for child protection as a scale for determining the seriousness of these situations. It includes descriptors of the harm to their development potentially suffered by children and adolescents deriving from situations of neglect within their birth family. This involves recognition of the physical and psychological suffering of minors, and understanding emotional, social and cognitive areas as fundamental aspects of their development (Balora, 2017).

The existence of significant harm to the child will therefore require subsidiary – and, we would add, effective – action by the relevant public authorities. On the other hand, the different situations of risk and/or social need that the children and adolescents in care may experience correspond to the diversity of types of lack of protection that are dealt with by the Child Protection Services. Table 1 shows the types of lack of protection and the associated percentages, taken from the total notifications of abandonment published by the Provin-

Table 1. Types of lack of protection reported to the Children's Service of Gipuzkoa, 2021

Physical Abuse	2%	9
Psychological Abuse	30%	130
Negligence	42%	182
Sexual Abuse	7%	30
Parental inability to control behaviour	20%	87
Serious parental difficulties	16%	69
Prenatal Abuse	1%	4
Abandonment	2%	9
History of serious lack of protection	10%	44
Temporary or permanent impossibility	5%	22
Other (begging, corruption, inappropriate treatment…)	3%	13

Source: 2021 Report of the Children's Service of the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa.

cial Council of Gipuzkoa in 2021. It shows that cases of severe neglect and psychological abuse constitute the highest percentages among the causes for family separation measures.

Following a declaration of abandonment and the assumption of guardianship by the relevant public administration, guardianship can take two forms: foster care (placement of the child with a different family), or residential care (placement of the child in a children's home).

In Spain, according to data from the Boletín de Estadística Básica de Medidas de Protección a la Infancia (2021) issued by the Ministry of Social Rights and Agenda 2030, in 2020 a total of 16,991 minors in a situation of neglect were in residential children's homes.

In the case of Gipuzkoa, according to the most recent data (Report of the Children's Service of the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa, 2021), 45.8% of cases receive specialized intervention in the home, 25.2% are in residential children's homes after being taken into care, and 29% are in a situation of alternative family care (foster care). If we look at the gender breakdown, data for the year 2021 show that 57.1% of those cared for were male and 42.9% female (Report of the Children's Service of the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa, 2021).

In terms of the province of Gipuzkoa specifically, and in view of the interest of this study, we transcribe data from the longitudinal research by Miguelena (2019). Graph 1 shows general school enrolment of the population in residential care 2015-2018, including both sexes, in a sample not differentiated by age.

These data show that school enrolment is higher for girls than for boys, and that it is girls who are choosing pathways towards higher education, within the framework of compulsory studies, prior to the baccalaureate. However, there has been a considerable drop in enrolments in the field of further education leading to university studies.

Likewise, a global reading of this study (Miguelena, 2019) allows us to obtain a broader view of the academic development of these boys and girls,

Graph 1. Distribution of students in residential care according to educational stage
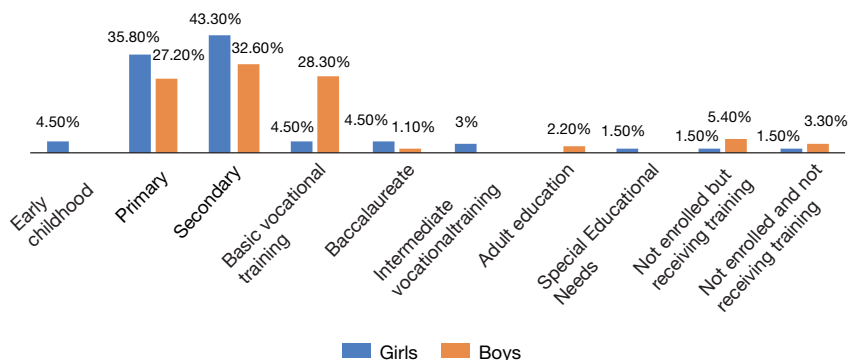
Source: Miguelena J. (2019)

depending on their countries of origin. Thus, those born in Spain (85.8%), South America (85.8%) and Other European countries (71.5%) were enrolled in primary education and ESO, while those born in African countries had the highest rate of schooling in Basic Vocational Training centres (50%).

Thus, despite the vulnerability associated with the group, there seems to be a clear gender bias in terms of women's chances of reaching higher academic levels; this is more common in indigenous girls and less common in girls from foreign countries, although the number of women in situations of homelessness who reach university is still only a small percentage.

3. Methodology

The aim of the current study was to examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the educational experience of adolescents in the residential care system of Gipuzkoa. The importance of this objective lies in observing what role institutionalization played in the period of lockdown, specifically in the case of adolescent girls.

This research is part of the H2020 Resistiré project (101015990), whose objective is to analyse the responses generated in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic from an intersectional and gender perspective. These responses can be institutional or individual, from civil society or from the users themselves. In this context, the views of adolescent girls in the residential system regarding their educational experiences are the focus of this article. This research has been carried out with the permission of the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa and has been subject to a subsequent ethical review process.

The main aim of this research has been achieved through the use of a qualitative methodology in which semi-structured in-depth interviews have been used. Voice has been given to girls and adolescents residing in a children's home in the province of Gipuzkoa.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted using a protocolized script of open questions structured around four blocks of questions: 1) their course attendance and the follow-up they received from their teachers; 2) academic results; 3) extra-academic support; 4) study materials used; and 5) interpersonal relationships.

3.1. Sample

The fieldwork was carried out in July 2022. The subject of research was a residential children's home for adolescents in the province of Gipuzkoa, providing a standard care programme. The objective of the programme is to create a normalized context that enables the children in its care to maintain a daily structure that allows them to integrate into society. Respondents were selected through communication with the children's home where they live. All of them participated in the research on a voluntary basis and with the promise of confidentiality. The research underwent all the necessary ethical procedures.

Table 2. Characteristics of the sample

Code	Current age	Age during lockdown	Academic level during lockdown	Origin	Typology of lack of protection during lockdown	Place of residence
E1	17	15	3RD ESO	Native	Extremely vulnerable	With birth family
E2	17	15	3RD ESO	Native	Homelessness	Residential Home
E3	16	14	2ND ESO	Non-EU	Extremely vulnerable	With birth family
E4	16	14	2ND ESO	Non-EU	Extremely vulnerable	With birth family
E5	15	13	2ND ESO	Non-EU	Homelessness	Residential Home
E6	15	13	2ND ESO	Native	Homelessness	Residential Home
E7	14	12	1ST ESO	Native	Homelessness	Residential Home
E8	16	14	2ND ESO	Non-EU	Extremely vulnerable	With birth family

Source: own elaboration

The authors are independent of the children's home selected, their relationship being circumstantial to this research.

All participants are girls. This is because the aim of the research is to look specifically at how the lockdown measures of the COVID-19 pandemic have affected women specifically.

The participants are between 14 and 17 years of age, and all of them are currently under a protection measure or care order that obliges them to live separated from their birth families. It should be considered that, although all of them currently have a family separation measure in place and are therefore under the guardianship of the relevant public administration, during the period of lockdown some of them were still living at home, in situations of risk of serious lack of protection, before the separation measure had been put in place.

The group is culturally diverse, which is of interest since, although all of them currently live in the Basque Country, they come from different places of origin – either because they were born in non-EU countries and have immigrated to Gipuzkoa either alone or with their families; or because they were born in the region (what is considered "native" in terms of this research), and are second generation children of migrant families. This selection corresponds to the situation of unprotected minors in the province, where, in addition to native people, there is a representation of adolescents from different migratory backgrounds, as well as from other EU countries.

This aspect is shown in Table 2, which includes the coding table of the sample. It is relevant in reference to the difficulties that some of the respondents report regarding their language skills.

3.2. Analysis

The analysis of the information obtained during the interviews followed the approach proposed by Taylor and Bodgan (1990), with the ultimate aim of seeking to develop an in-depth understanding of the scenarios or persons being

studied (Salgado, 2007). Thus, the analysis carried out was divided into three distinct stages: 1) Discovery phase: in which the emerging themes were sought by examining the data provided; 2) Coding phase: in which the data were coded and the different coding categories were developed; and 3) Data relativization phase, interpreting the information obtained. To ensure immersion in each of the interviews, each interview was reread, and significant aspects were noted. After analysing the interviews, saturation was reached in terms of themes and categories (Suárez-Relinque, del Moral-Arroyo & González-Fernández, 2013). Content analysis was performed with the support of Atlas-ti 7.0 software.

4. Results

The situation of enforced and highly restrictive lockdown experienced in Spain from March to May 2020 meant the immediate suspension of daily activities, which affected the normal day-to-day life of all citizens. The young women interviewed for this study were inevitably caught up in this situation and had to remain in their homes for a period of three months, with very few options for leaving their homes, as was the case for the general population.

Inevitably, their attendance at their respective schools and training centres was affected, which had far-reaching implications for them, given their complex personal and family situations. We will see below how the degree of impact on their academic and training experiences affected different areas of their lives, although it seems clear that their academic environments were obliged to formulate an improvised response to the uncertainty and unpredictability of the situation.

In order to analyse their situation, we specified different aspects that would allow us to extract specific details of their experiences in terms of 1) their class attendance and the follow-up they received from their teachers; 2) academic results; 3) extra-academic support; 4) the study materials used and; 5) interpersonal relationships, allowing us to determine the existence of significant changes at some of these levels, as well as the particularity of their own experiences during the pandemic.

4.1. Attendance and follow-up of classes

First, we were interested to know whether they maintained regular attendance at school during lockdown, via the online connections established for following classes. We see that the responses are varied, although there is a clear distinction between those who report that they lacked motivation and chose not to attend classes, and those who report that they maintained regular attendance.

> I didn't do anything, I didn't feel like doing anything. We had online classes, horrible really, but I didn't go online. I didn't feel like doing anything when I finished the online classes. (E3)

> When the pandemic started, I became demotivated and stopped joining classes and in the end I stopped attending classes. (E2)

We can see that both interviewees refer to their feelings of demotivation with regard to the online nature of the classes, to the point that they abandoned classes definitively. Other female interviewees, however, reported that they had kept up their rate of attendance, while still acknowledging the problems that this type of attendance involves, specifically mentioning problems relating to internet connections, the lack of organization of the teaching staff, or even difficulties in understanding the contents of the course.

> I didn't miss any of them. There was a lot of confusion about the video calls, because there was a link that I don't know, that there were teachers who gave you more than one subject. So, I didn't know whether to use that link or the other one. (E6)

> I used to go to classes. But […] because of the language, well […] it was very difficult for me. And then there were some things that were very difficult for me, for example some Maths and so on that I wasn't very good at. (E8)

As we can see, the experiences reported by the adolescents show some variation. Some interviewees mention a feeling of being monitored and checked up on by the teachers, although the majority of the adolescents experienced greater flexibility in this aspect than in normal situations.

> I don't think so, maybe they called us a couple of times but very few. Compared to what they call you right now in case you miss class, [...] in the quarantine, no […] I don't think they could control everything that went around. (E1)

> If you didn't connect, the teacher sent you an email or said in the call that we should write to each other in the Whatsapp group […] the teacher said that we should contact the group and tell them to join. (E6)

We understand that the circumstances of the situation and the improvised nature of the educational context enforced by the health crisis had a negative impact on the ability of the teachers of these teenage girls to monitor their attendance. In general, a certain failure to check up on the situation of each student is perceived, and it is therefore worth asking whether these responses, which are somewhat varied in terms of the students' attendance in class, may have had an impact on the greater vulnerability of the students. They also offer lessons for avoiding future risks of school failure.

4.2. Academic results

The lack of attendance and the lack of motivation that the girls reported may have had a detrimental effect on their academic development. Indeed, the gen-

eral perception expressed by the girls was that the teachers were less demanding; they reported that academic progress was easier, assessment exercises had been adapted to the situation; and, in general, exams were at a lower level. In the words of the girls themselves, "it was all easier."

> I had failed "everything" in inverted commas, because I hadn't done anything, but as I couldn't repeat [the course] again they gave me fives. So I had already passed the third year [course] without doing anything. I wasn't any good, but I had passed third year (E1).

> In the end I kind of passed, as we finished lockdown before the end of the course, well, the last push and I passed, I passed the course […] but how, I don't know… (E3)

In addition to a shared feeling that the courses were less demanding, some of the girls interviewed felt that the situation itself could have helped them to pass an academic course which, under normal conditions, would have been more challenging. Particularly striking is the awareness shown by E3 with respect to her own academic ability, showing in her account that she does not consider the result to be in any way due to her own merit.

However, these accounts are complemented by the experience of other adolescent girls, who maintained very low levels of attendance and involvement, resulting in academic results that did not allow them to move on to the next grade:

> When we had to go home, my marks went down a lot because there was work and so on that they sent me in Basque. I didn't understand and when I was in class the teachers and so on helped me a bit and so on, but when I was at home without that help, well … my marks did go down a lot […] I repeated a year. (E8)

In this respect, we would like to highlight the account given by E8 of the difficulties she encountered in following the classes during lockdown, linked to her difficulties with her knowledge of Basque. She is a teenager born in a foreign country who learned the language after her arrival in the Basque Country, in a migratory process that was not without difficulties. In this sense, the added vulnerability that these girls may have experienced during lockdown is evident, as they lack direct support to enable them to understand academic content in a language other than their language of origin.

4.3. Academic support

The vulnerability of adolescents in situations of child neglect with respect to their academic development has been demonstrated and contrasted through various research and scientific studies, referenced in this article.

In this regard, it is common for adolescent girls living in children's homes to require after-school classes or extracurricular support aimed at reinforcing

the subjects that are more difficult for them, or in which they have greater comprehension and/or learning difficulties.

This type of support reinforces language skills or the learning of more complex subjects such as those involving logical-mathematical thinking. Among the reports obtained, we only found two adolescents who claimed to have received the extracurricular support they had already started prior to the period of lockdown

> Yes, I did go and when I was in lockdown, we did make calls or if you had an after-school class at 17:00 in the afternoon you had to join a call and they would send you some worksheets by email and these worksheets were checked by the teacher and you could see if you did them or not. (E6)

As we can see, the extra tuition these interviewees received for school catch-up continued to operate, offering support through remote tutoring, similar to the teaching they received from their schools.

However, the majority of the responses offer a very different perspective, reporting that they did not receive additional academic support during the pandemic, so that they had to overcome the challenges of the school year themselves, as well as the difficulties associated with the circumstances at the time.

> I used to go to an after-school class just to do English, Maths and Basque, but when we were put into lockdown… of course, I stopped going […] I needed a lot of support, especially for the classes that are in Basque. That was the most difficult thing. The language. Because imagine, for example, in Maths everything was in Basque. Problems and things in Basque. And I couldn't do that because I didn't understand. (E8)

Once again, interviewees report difficulties in understanding and a lack of adult support who could provide the learning support expressed by this adolescent (E8). In view of the feedback from these young women, it is worth asking whether they received the help they needed in the absence of in-person classroom attendance, help that in their case, and due to their particular circumstances, they did not always receive from the adults with whom they lived.

At this point, in the case of adolescent girls living in children's homes during the pandemic, it is interesting to highlight some of the responses from girls who, unlike other participants, say that they did receive support at home from the professionals working in their children's homes when they needed specific explanations or support on specific subjects.

> At [the residential] home we all do homework in the living room or in the bedroom And if I have a question, they are still here with me to help me. If I have an exam they usually come too, they help me study […] During the pandemic too, even more I think. If you had any questions, they would come and explain it to you. In other words, you were in an on-line lesson, you didn't understand the teacher and you called them. I used to mute the call, tell the

> social worker [referring to the professional working at the residential home] to come and explain it to me and that's it. (E6)

The presence of adults who can resolve the difficulties or shortcomings in the care provided by the birth parents, fulfilling the functions that their birth parents cannot provide, is clear in these responses. It is precisely this complementary function, provided through their presence in the upbringing of these adolescents, that is the subsidiary public function assigned to residential foster care as a care measure.

4.4. Academic resources during lockdown

The delivery of classes in online mode, initiated suddenly and immediately following the declaration of the health emergency, requires access to new study materials, different to more traditional ones such as books or notebooks.

To a certain extent, adapting to the new era, which educational centres have been moving towards for years, is democratizing student access to portable technology, as this is seen as the basic resource required for study and work. This offers each student the possibility to have a personal laptop for academic use, something which has inevitably facilitated the transition to online classes enormously.

Some of the adolescent girls reported similar experiences when they were asked about the academic resources used during the pandemic, answering that they continued to use the computer they already had, or even used their mobile phones for academic purposes.

> We don't have books at all. It's all on the computer. At my school we use the computer for everything […]. What happens is that in mathematics, physics and chemistry and everything that you had to do the exercises on paper, you took your mobile phone, you took a photo and you had to upload it to the computer […] or if you had to do a project you recorded yourself doing the project and uploaded it, so you use both the mobile phone and the computer. (E6)

However, the use of technology in the classroom is still in the process of being rolled out, so not all schools have abandoned the use of books as reference materials in favour of exclusively using technology. For this reason, during lockdown some adolescent girls encountered difficulties accessing online classes, as well doing school assignments digitally.

> When we are at home we use the computer more, because we have to send work and so on, or by post, so we use it more. I didn't have one, they lent it to me at school. (E8)

As we can see from their accounts, the girls who did not have their own computer prior to lockdown had the possibility of using devices provided by their respective schools, which effectively alleviated the situations of greatest

need among the families with the greatest difficulties. In this sense, it seems that equality of opportunity in terms of access to technology as a study resource was maintained, as was access to the internet, since only one of the adolescents interviewed reported that she did not have access to the internet at first, a situation that was remedied shortly afterwards.

> At first I didn't have internet, but then I did. We called to contract the company (E3).

The use of laptops was common and generalized by all of them for continuing their academic work during those months. The exercises of each class and the tasks associated with each subject were performed on the computer and sent through platforms or via e-mail to the teachers, but the computer was also used as a meeting resource in the classroom. Group video calls became the way to maintain the structure of a physical classroom in the virtual space, and the cameras attached to each device made face-to-face meetings in the classroom possible, offering more relationship-based uses.

4.5. Relationships during lockdown

Undoubtedly, the loss of direct, physical contact with our respective social groups was one of the most far-reaching repercussions of the COVID-19 health crisis, caused by the restrictions that governments and countries around the world imposed as preventive measures. This sense of lack of interaction with others emerges in the girls' accounts, as they repeatedly mention a sense of loss of their personal relationships with their peer groups, especially with classmates:

> I lost a lot of contact. My relationships with friends were good, normal, […] but during lockdown I lost a lot of contact […] suddenly it was all over. I spoke very little with them. (E3)

> Well, with some people I did change a bit because we didn't talk much and so on… But I always normally kept in contact with my best friend and so on, through video calls and mobile phones, but with other friends or friends we used to be with I changed the relationship a bit, we didn't talk anymore… I was more distant, you know? (E8)

We can see, therefore, that the absence of a physical space for meeting, together with the particular nature of the moment, and possibly individual factors beyond the scope of this research, may explain the feeling of loss of contact with their social environment experienced by these teenagers. Nevertheless, some of the girls report the existence of certain relationships, apart from their classmates, with whom they always maintained more contact through video calls or social networks.

However, we would like to highlight two accounts from teenage girls who reflect positively on their relationships with classmates, reporting that

in their case the opposite effect occurred; that is, the virtual space became a relational space.

> I got closer to my high school friends because we made phone calls and we were on video calls during the classes and we stayed on the same call when the class was over. So I think so. We got closer. […] It was good because I would stay for hours talking to them about my life. (E6)

> We kept in touch with the class […] well, by mobile phone, by computer. Well, there were some who were cut out and some that weren't. (E5)

In view of the specific details of these responses, we consider it important to consider a second period, linked to their relationships and the impact of lockdown. So, to conclude the interview with the participants in the study, we were interested in finding out what their experiences were after returning to the classroom, when they were reunited with their classmates. The responses to this question coincide in pointing out an initial feeling of strangeness, of a certain difficulty due to the passage of time and the loss of the dynamic of the relationships typical of daily encounters.

The adolescents are very clear in their accounts, showing that they felt a major change between them, even physical changes that surprised them enormously and generated feelings of strangeness and embarrassment. In general, their comments spoke of a certain initial distancing after months of lack of contact.

> People changed quite a lot. A year without seeing each other… There were people who had one physique, ended up having another. Then also the groups of friends and they split up. Then they got together… (E6)

Other teenagers refer to more personal aspects, carrying out an interesting exercise of introspection in which they are able to identify the internal difficulties that they themselves remember having experienced during their reunions with classmates after months of lockdown at home.

> It was more difficult for me to relate. It was like everything was new, so as I hadn't left the house for so long… I don't know, I was embarrassed. […] After lockdown, it was hard for me to talk. Well, before as well, but after, a lot more. (E3)

> It was a bit weird because it was again with your mates and so on. And it's like you've been taken out of a cave, like, you've forgotten what physical contact and things like that were like […] I really didn't even remember what my relationships were like, how to talk to people, what it was like to feel good, to feel bad […]. I swear I'd forgotten about the hugs that came up (E2).

It is particularly interesting to understand the feelings expressed by these young women, insofar as they identify affective losses in their narratives that translate into an absence of physical contact, or even of the practice of communication (speech) as a basis for human interaction. As we have said, this is

undoubtedly an issue of great interest due to the emotional impact that this type of situation generates in human beings, who are eminently social beings.

5. Discussion

The aim of the current study was to examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the educational experiences of adolescents in the residential care system, based on the adolescents' perspectives.

The closure of schools and other learning spaces as a result of the health crisis affected 94% of the world's student population (UN, 2020), so that 1.2 billion students at all levels of education around the world were out of school (UNESCO, 2020). The consequences that this situation has had on the child and youth population are particularly significant in the field of education, which required creative and effective alternatives to respond to the educational needs of children and adolescents around the world.

The views of these adolescents show different aspects of this lockdown in their respective educational experiences. Taking into account the different impacts that the lockdown had on the group offers the possibility of adapting preventative interventions, in order to prevent the emergence of situations that further aggravate the vulnerability of these adolescents.

Several research studies address the vulnerability of children in care in terms of their academic situation (Tilbury, 2010; Hedin et al., 2011;) and highlight the need to address the gap in educational experience between children and adolescents in care and their peers (Sebba et al., 2015). Access to education and the academic pathway are predictors of adaptation and autonomy in the transition to adulthood, a transition that they will also have to make much earlier than the average young person of their age (Goyette, 2010).

In terms of attendance and follow-up of online classes, there are differences between the interviewees. Some report that they regularly followed the classes scheduled by the schools, while in other cases, the responses show that they felt demotivated, mainly due to the online format and the new methodologies. This demotivation, together with the lack of strictness or scrutiny by some of the teaching staff at their schools, meant that what should have been an academic year with greater rigor and academic demands turned into one that could be passed easily.

The role of teachers was a central element, both in assessing results and in offering follow-up alternatives to those with greater difficulties. In this respect, academic results are mixed.

While some adolescents managed to pass the course, others were unable to reverse an already complex academic situation that was aggravated by lockdown itself. This disparity in results does not diminish the subjective perception of the adolescents regarding the help they have received from their teachers, or even of having benefited from a lower level of expectation from their teachers. This aspect confirms elements already identified by previous research, which reveals a population characterized by habitual school absences and grade

repetition, and generally low expectations (Bravo & Del Valle, 2001; Del Valle et al., 2000; Montserrat et al., 2015; Martín et al., 2020).

On the other hand, the absence of extracurricular support for learning emerges as a constant theme among these adolescents, with limited availability of extra tutoring as a resource to support school learning.

Given the circumstances arising from the enforced lockdown, the possibility of receiving support from the adults responsible for these young girls diminished, since it was only the domestic context that could respond to the situation caused by the health crisis. On this point, the effectiveness of the complementary nature of the residential care home system can be observed (compared to the cases of adolescent girls who, despite being at serious risk, remained in their respective homes during the pandemic).

Likewise, difficulties relating to the language level of some of the girls, whose condition as foreign migrant females, together with the lack of specific support for learning the Basque language, compromised their chances of reaching the minimum academic level required. The present research shows that these academic support needs were met by the professionals at their care homes, as a subsidiary function of their roles.

On the other hand, the results of the study show that the rapid adaptation of educational centres to the new guidelines imposed by the pandemic made it possible for adolescent girls to adapt to their own educational needs in order to continue their education. In line with the advice from expert forums, school systems moved from traditional education to distance education based on digital education methodologies, with new materials and platforms (World Economic Forum, 2020).

Thus, the use of new technologies has since become very important insofar as they have come to replace traditional materials, such as textbooks, with individual laptops and even personal mobiles, converting these into new tools for pedagogical use. Although this situation may have made it difficult for adolescent girls who did not have their own devices to follow their classes regularly, the efficiency of the schools in responding to these shortcomings – as well as the provision of pre-existing resources (laptops, tablets or mobile phones) – meant that the interviewees had access to the material resources they needed to continue their education.

What was an advantage in the academic sphere, however, was a two-edged sword in terms of relationships. The pandemic clearly led to the loss of in-person contact with social groups. Difficulties in maintaining the usual habits and dynamics of socialization may have affected the general well-being of children and adolescents (Erades & Morales, 2020), with unprotected children being particularly vulnerable as their options for having access to extended family, friends and other community support networks were compromised (OECD, 2020).

In some of the responses of the young women interviewed, the experience of this social isolation takes on certain particularities. Based on their responses, we can infer a generalized feeling of discomfort due to the absence of direct contact with friends and classmates, which was especially felt when they met up again and re-entered their usual school dynamics (in September 2020).

In some cases, however, internet connection devices were redefined for them as spaces for interaction and contact with peers.

In this way, the use of new technologies favoured the continuation of peer relationships, as the usefulness of new technologies was able to mitigate the impact of the pandemic in terms of access to different informal support networks (OECD, 2020). Undoubtedly, the absence of peer relationships and interaction had an impact on these eight adolescents, in common with aspects already pointed out by UNICEF (2020), that children and adolescents in care homes suffered greatly from physical and social distancing, as well as other restrictions that caused feelings of isolation and loneliness, disrupted their routines and limited their access to extended family, friends and other community support networks.

6. Conclusion

The above literature review shows that the COVID-19 pandemic and its social consequences, such as school closure, has again affected one of the most vulnerable populations: children and adolescents, especially if they come from low socio-economic backgrounds, as these groups might experience persisting scarring effects that might compromise their educational attainment in the future (Maestripieri, 2021).

Although the institutional response was effective, especially in terms of the effectiveness demonstrated in providing the online resources that the girls and adolescents needed to follow their lessons, there were significant differences between the different responses of the teaching staff and the adults (legal guardians) of these girls. Significant differences can be observed in the different responses of teachers and adults – those legally responsible for these young girls; – and in the support provided to overcome academic difficulties. This was very varied and depended on the willingness and availability of the girls' teachers and/or legal guardians (parents or educators).

The lockdown in Spain was particularly restrictive and long-lasting, and entailed an almost total limitation of personal interactions. The impact of this relational loss will be the focus of future research, which will have to undertake the difficult task of determining the emotional and even psychosomatic damage derived from this situation. Undoubtedly, this will be a subject of interest for research beyond this study.

At the same time, the pandemic exacerbated the already existing challenges these adolescents faced before COVID-19 appeared. Addressing these challenges quickly is key to avoiding a rise in inequality – among the current generation of children and the next – and to ensuring inclusive growth.

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Finally, we would like to acknowledge the enormous contribution of each of the adolescent girls who participated in this study. Their generosity and collaboration have allowed us to learn first-hand about their experiences, which are usually characterized by complex and painful situations. Once again, all of them are examples of self-improvement, and of struggle and courage in the face of life's difficulties. They represent a small number of all those girls who have previously been in the same position and are an example for those who will inevitably be in their position in the future. Living with them, talking with them, interacting with them is all about learning. Thank you for your spontaneity, your kindness and your affection. I hope that in these lines we can convey the admiration and respect we feel for you. For the heroines of this story.

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